Growing a Rhizome: Embodying Early Experiences in Learning

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Abstract

As early childhood education continues to grow and gain credibility within the New Zealand education system, there is a need to be continuously rethinking our approaches to curriculum. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer a philosophical concept of ‘rhizome’ that can contribute to current understandings of curriculum, particularly when viewing curriculum as processual rather than as an object(ive). This article reflects on understandings of curriculum as continuous dynamic learning-teaching-experiencing processes, what these might mean for children in early childhood settings and the interrelationships of such curricular understandings with Te Whaariki. It suggests that stories about children, like children’s stories, can contribute to curriculum discourse and that reading Te Whaariki rhizomatically has potential for furthering discussion of early childhood curriculum in New Zealand and beyond.

Introducing Ideas

In their account of the reconceptualisation of contemporary curriculum studies in North America, Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995, p.867) call for “collaboration, conversation, and disciplinary autonomy to increase the complexity of the [curriculum] field”. They argue that for the field to grow, we need to encourage the proliferation of theories, philosophies and methodologies through forms of conversation that are both complicated and complex. Reconceptualising curriculum is “still quite open” and there is room for many actors: “We invite you to join us. The next moment is yours” (p.868). This article is a response to this invitation to participate in conversational spaces of understanding curriculum.

In this conversational space I explore Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) philosophical concept of rhizome alongside the work of other educational researchers using these ideas, including Elizabeth St.Pierre, Patricia O’Riley, Donna Alvermann, Glenda MacNaughton and Eileen Honan. Through their explication of the metaphorical rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari bring “philosophy ‘proper’ into closer contact with sociocultural issues and practical concerns” (Semetsky, 2004, p.227). They work to break the linear unity of ‘tree’ and ‘root’ type knowledge, which is fixated on an hierarchical order, towards creating assemblages that ceaselessly foster connections and expand, like a biological rhizome, in all directions at once (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp.6-7). My intention is to explore how ‘rhizome’ is useful for discovering multiple
connections between young children’s learning and early childhood curriculum to show how children and contexts, in sociocultural terms, are mutually constituted. I begin by discussing aspects of reconceptualising curriculum and relationships between children's stories and curriculum. I then offer my interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of ‘rhizome’ and review some educational researchers’ recent applications of this concept. I conclude by suggesting how we might think differently about the New Zealand early childhood curriculum called Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996) and what this might mean for young children in early childhood settings.

Within this paper I weave a story about Marcy, a toddler, the catalyst for shaping the gaze of my research. The story is an assemblage of ‘real’ and fictional people, places and events that represent my understandings of how situational experiences appear for some young children in early childhood settings. Such storytelling is a form of narrative inquiry in which fact and fiction are mutually constitutive. Within this paper, facts are “given meaning by the storytelling practices which produce them” (Gough, 1998, p.99) and fiction becomes useful to factual tasks of reconceptualising. Narrative becomes a way of understanding experience. “With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and how it might be studied and represented in researcher’s texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.xxvi). Thus Marcy’s story contextualises my understandings of other ways of viewing curriculum.

**Reconceptualising Curriculum**

During the 1970s a number of curriculum theorists began to question developmentalist approaches to curriculum, including approaches based on positivist science assumptions about ‘the child’ and ‘the curriculum’, instead favouring approaches informed by humanities and the arts (Pinar et al., 1995). This conceptual shift became a focus for a number of early childhood curriculum theorists as they explored alternative perspectives of curriculum theory in general – theories not directly related to early childhood but theories that were seen to be applicable (Kessler & Swadener, 1992). These included interpretive/phenomenological (Aoki, 1980/2005; Pinar, 1975), critical (Apple, 1979), and feminist points of view (Grumet, 1976), which considered curriculum as a raft of local, situated and subjective experiences. New Zealand early childhood educationalists worked in the 1990s on developing a sociocultural perspective on curriculum for early childhood education services. Te Whaariki, which is claimed to include both Maori and New Zealand European/Pakeha cultural perspectives, was published in 1996 by the Ministry of Education. Te Whaariki emphasises “the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.9).

As theorists and educators continue to explore approaches to curriculum, reconceptualist questions critically inform ongoing research. Questions such as: What counts as knowledge? Whose stories are represented in prescriptions for (the) early childhood curriculum? Whose interests are being served by (the) curriculum? What visions for the future might be embodied in (the) curriculum as we understand it? In this paper I incorporate into these questions the notion of stories, which offers a complex conception involving situation, narrative and interpretation (Grumet, 1990) moving
towards a pluralism that promotes multiple forms of representation and research (Bochner, 2001). I bracketed ‘(the)’ above to signal a more complex reading of ‘curriculum’; One that disrupts the commonplace understanding of curriculum as an object or thing. Bracketing ‘(the)’ also foregrounds my approach to researching understandings of curriculum as being processual, that is, embedded in experiential living processes. Processual can be defined as relating to or involving the study of processes. Foregrounding this processual perspective also problematises curriculum as a focus of speculation and inquiry rather than an object to be ‘fixed’ (in any sense of the word).

Reconceptualising early childhood curriculum continues to attract interest as more generative ideas emerge from theory and practice (Kilderry, Nolan, & Noble, 2004). Alongside continuing calls from within the field of curriculum theory for (re)conceptualising curriculum (for example, Doll & Gough, 2002; Pinar, 1975; Pinar et al., 1995; Pinar, 2004), there is an ongoing call for more empirical data from within early child education (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, 2004). As the reconceptualist (poststructuralist) agenda attempts a blurring of boundaries between the interpretive, the critical, and the empirical, it is my intention to respect both empirical and poststructuralist approaches through an analysis of a momentary experience, utilising a story about Marcy.

**A Story about Marcy**

I met Marcy in an early childhood setting, on a day that heightened my awareness of the powerlessness of infants, toddlers and young children in some early childhood settings to eat, sleep or play when and how they want. At the particular moment I was ushered into Marcy’s world, a small group of under-twos were seated around a large round table waiting for a story to be read before their morning-tea. The teacher overseeing the group appeared to be finding it difficult to sustain the children’s interest in the book. My arrival was an added distraction. None of the children were seated for easy engagement with the teacher or the book, and I suspect that the food smells wafting from the kitchen were focusing their attention on hunger and food, not books and reading. Marcy’s attention was definitely elsewhere. She was unnoticed initially by other teachers, quietly engrossed in doing a puzzle, but once spotted she was told to join the group. Marcy refused despite the teacher’s commands. I was sitting nearby and, before I could anticipate her next move, she hurtled across the room and planted herself on my knee. Without thinking, I put my arms around her and she settled into listening to the story. For a brief moment, it seemed that the problem had been resolved. Marcy was complying – she had left the puzzle and had implicitly agreed to come and listen to the story. But in the same moment, I realised that her terms of compliance were unacceptable; she was required to be seated at the table. I also realised in that moment that I was now complicit in her resistance, in what was later referred to as her disruptive behaviour. As I gently lifted her to the floor, my heart sank. Marcy’s expression of how she wanted to engage with curriculum was denied by the teachers – whether she was ignored or just went unnoticed, the outcome was the same in that she was disempowered. The puzzle was not to be completed; the chair took precedence over the knee. Foucault’s (1979) notions of power, control and surveillance came to the fore, and
their implications for Marcy and her learning were projected indelibly onto the screen of my understanding.

Although I had only just walked into the situation and knew nothing of Marcy and little of the context, from my outsider-observer position, it appeared that Marcy was resisting co-operating with the more powerful adult regime and although she signalled a level of compliance, her attempt to compromise was disregarded. The teachers would likely justify their teaching practice by pointing to prescribed learning outcomes for Marcy aligned to Te Whaariki’s principles and strands. Yet, I suspect Marcy’s reading of Te Whaariki might have a different slant, perhaps one of affirming her expression of what curriculum meant and privileging her desire and right to be heard, respected, understood and valued.

**Bringing Children’s Stories into Theory**

Stories like this one about Marcy (re)turn us to the reconceptualising questions listed earlier in this paper, questions that also critically inform my concern for bringing more of the stories of young children into the world of theory and research, into spaces where they might be listened to and (re)heard recursively by the more powerful world of educationists. For the purposes of this discussion, the fabricated vignette, ‘a story about Marcy’, contextualises the concepts introduced in this paper but with an awareness that is likely different from what Marcy’s story (her explication of a moment) might have been. (Re)conceptualising of curriculum that is more relevant to children’s understandings is by default, grounded in the reality of children’s understandings (Page & Hammer, 2003), but opening up new spaces of intellectual engagement (Johnson, 2001) is similarly integral to the process. Through this story about Marcy, a fragment of data, I seek a plurality of connections that may be discovered through asking: Who is present and on what terms? (MacNaughton, 2003); What discourses are brought to life within this fragment? (Davies, 2000); What are the connections with other texts? (Alvermann, 2000).

We know that children are not passive in the educational process, that even very young children are active co-constructors in their own knowledge and understanding and that they are “able to surpass limits of power assigned to them” (Honan, Knobel, Baker, & Davies, 2000, p.30). Marcy’s disruptive behaviour could be interpreted as exercising her right to have her everyday learning experiences respected in ways that she expressed as being meaningful for her. However while Marcy demonstrated she was able to take charge of her own learning and while she attempted to surpass the more powerful teacher-imposed limits, she was ultimately prevented from doing so. Kessler and Swadener (1992) put it this way:

> We must continually ask ourselves how knowledge about children and their ways of knowing is constructed and how our perspectives on what is known and worth knowing depend on beliefs about how one constructs and acquires knowledge. These questions lead inevitably to issues of evaluating what is ‘known’. What criteria do we use to determine the validity of knowledge? Is one way of knowing better than another? Are all equal? (p.289)
Kessler and Swadener’s questions are useful for foregrounding young children’s stories so that we might better understand children’s thinking about curriculum and their learning. We can rephrase the questions to assist us to view children as powerful players in their own learning and expert contributors to topics of learning (Jordan, 2004): Are we taking into account children’s views about what they see as important to their learning? Might children’s understandings be as appropriate to their learning as adult understandings? Should we consider curriculum from the perspective that children’s understandings are as valid as those of adults?

A sociocultural perspective alters how we discuss and position educational research, opening up new spaces of intellectual engagement (Kilderry et al., 2004). A Deleuzean philosophical reading of early childhood curriculum offers an explorative way into such spaces. What follows is my interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of rhizome.

**About Rhizomatous Inquiry**

Understanding the botanical rhizome can help for understanding the philosophical rhizome that Deleuze and Guattari (1987) conceptualised. A rhizome is a subterranean stem that assumes diverse forms, from multi-directional surface extension, such as kikuyu grass to thick, swollen bulb- and tuber-like masses like the edible root ginger. Because a rhizome has the potential to move horizontally as well as expand multi-dimensionally, its points of re-growth, and its shoots and roots, are chaotically acentred, taking on a complex existence/being, as it spreads outwards (extending), inwards (expanding), upwards (shoots), downwards (roots). See an illustration of this in Figure 1 below.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1.** The Multi-dimensionality of Rhizomatic Growth (Illustration by Warren Sellers)
Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomatic approach disrupts conventional linearity and hierarchy, including the (metaphorical) tree of knowledge. Arborescent thinking utilises concepts of branches and roots through which we receive knowledge from the past (or pasts) and develop it within the present and (ostensibly) pass it on to future generations. Such arborescence “supports a binary logic and symbolizes linear and ordered systems of thinking” (Alvermann, 2000, p.116) in that it is fixed and rooted so that what is beneath the surface mirrors what is above. Although there is opportunity for thought to divert and digress, it happens genealogically, through “a logic of tracing and reproduction” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.12). Tracing involves continuous repetitions of structural patterns already present, and reproduction involves continuously reconstituting what is thus perceived as a closed structure. To provide “points of structuration” (p.13), the knowledge tree “plots a point, fixes an order” (p.7), and as such, follows a sequentially ordered process towards a logical and coherent conclusion. Both tracing and reproduction thus produce more of the same, this arborescent metaphor being intrinsic to linear thinking.

The rhizome, however, involves mapping in which a map is “open and connectable in all of its dimensions…[with] multiple entryways” (p.12). These maps, unlike tracings, have no beginnings or endings, just middles, and it is by to-ing and fro-ing through the middle – “the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and...and’…” (p.25) – that we can become aware of dynamically interconnected and continuously changing relationships. Within research these conjunctions, for example, accumulate into acentered gatherings of knowledge that seek to avoid the linear either/or of dualistic thinking, which includes maps being hierarchically positioned above tracings. Also, in ceaselessly establishing connections (p.7), rhizoanalysis requires that the tracing be put back on the map (p.13) as the “root-tree and canal-rhizome are not two opposed models” (p.20). The rhizome is about “directions in motion” or “lines of flight” (p.21), about travelling and moving, “proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting or finishing” (p.25). Lather (1993, p.680) explains that “rhizomes work against the constraints of authority, regularity, and commonsense, and open thought up to creative constructions”. Thus in rhizoanalysis much of the inquiry is accomplished within the process of writing.

(Re)Thinking Thinking and (Re)Searching Research

Nomadic Inquiry

St.Pierre’s (2000; 2004) works as “nomad” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.18) flow freely through open or middle spaces. In discussing her research methodology and method, she explains rhizomatic/nomadic inquiry as being less focussed on ends, instead enabling different ways of thinking, of moving into spaces where we can envision other ways of being and contemplate what it might mean to realise them. For example, rather than asking what a concept specifically means, ask, “Does it work? What new thoughts does it make possible to think?” (St.Pierre, 2004, p.285). Thus, within nomadic spaces of rhizomatic inquiry, questions arise like: What exists here? What else might there be in this space? What other spaces might there be? What might happen in those other spaces? St.Pierre (2004) searches for “spaces in which something different may happen” (p.287). She embarks on nomadic wanderings, to “travel in the thinking that writing produces” (p.258. See also Richardson & St.Pierre, 2005). This involves (re)turning to spaces already worked – mental spaces, textual spaces and theoretical spaces – to discover previously unseen possibilities. What becomes important is not defining the specifics of a “straight path from beginning to end” (St.Pierre, 2000, p.261) but writing about “flowing through unregulated sites of passage” (pp.278-279).

Marcy’s story is also about negotiating a middle space. Tracing the circumscribed straight path prescribed by the teachers in the setting seemed to be irrelevant to her learning in that middle-moment. Marcy was possibly engaged in responding to questions as: What exists here? And, what else might there be in this space? As her puzzling was interrupted and she chose knee over chair, perhaps she was querying the following: What other spaces might there be? And, what might happen in those spaces? If this were so, it is likely that she was disappointed in her (dis/inter/rupted) inquiry. Had she been allowed to continue to negotiate the middle of her inquiry, to finish the puzzle, to enter the storytelling space in her own way, her engagement with curriculum would have been respected and she would have become empowered.

Rhizomatic Writing

Similar to St.Pierre, O’Riley (2003) incorporates her Deleuzean interpretation of methodology into the storytelling of her research about a cultural politics of difference in technology discourses in education. O’Riley emphasises that her connections with the writings of Deleuze and Guattari are personal:

“It is not an enclosed storytelling nor an elaborate system of textual defence moving toward a gripping conclusion; rather it is a radical (actually, rhizomatic) writing journey mixing and juxtaposing styles, genres, theories, and practices – always in a state of ‘becoming’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.20).

Like St.Pierre’s tentative inquiry, O’Riley’s (2003) nomadic/rhizomatic writing journey takes her into unsafe spaces within dominant technology discourses as it involves “finding and creating holes in enclosed narratives” (p.18). Similarly, I have entered provisional, unsafe spaces in this nomadic inquiry, by suggesting we alter the slant of
our perception, so as to see through Deleuzean projections. Supporting a letting go of “conventional wisdom and wilful ignorance” (p.21) – that risk leaving Marcy’s stories unheard, unseen, unobserved – disturbs commonly accepted ways of thinking.

O’Riley (2003) believes that rhizoanalysis frees us to seek cracks and ruptures, to (re)negotiate conventional academic spaces, to break with conventional methods and methodology, “reconstituting ourselves [and young children] as nomadic thinkers and nomadic subjectivities” (p.120). O’Riley focuses on the problematics of minorities. She discusses the colonisation of the Canadian First Peoples and I suggest that young children’s stories and understandings are often similarly colonised and rendered invisible in adult majority discourses of early childhood education. Rhizoanalysis affords ways of legitimising minority stories as hierarchies are disrupted and middle spaces negotiated.

Considering Marcy’s story, my desire to know the unsaid illuminates potential nomadic spaces through seeking the unseen, the unobserved, and the unheard, towards enfranchising childhood understandings. As I continue to (re)view the momentary story about Marcy through different projections, readers may infer that too much is being made of this fragmentary experience. However, my intention is to continue to “live in the story” (Frank, 1995, cited in Bochner, 2001, p.141) and not leave the space until I am satisfied I have explored what may exist in the shadows.

Rhizoanalysis

Alvermann (2000) re-examines findings from an earlier study using the Deleuzean rhizome, seeking “possibilities it might (or might not) hold for looking once again at the data” (p.114). For her, rhizoanalysis involves creating a map – “open and connectable in all its dimensions...[with] multiple entryways” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.12) – and placing the tracing of the original findings back on the map. It becomes, for Alvermann (2000, p.118):

… a method of examining texts that allows us to see things in the middle. Looking for middles, rather than beginnings and endings, makes it possible to decenter key linkages and find new ones, not by combining old ones in new ways, but by remaining open to the proliferation of ruptures and discontinuities that in turn create other linkages.

In putting the tracing back on the map, I become aware that a rhizoanalysis of Marcy’s situation requires extensive data production – inviting Marcy to tell me her story, recording perspectives of the teacher, conversing with other children about their learning and about the daily routines of the setting, and possibly more. Such a plurality of dimensions may open new spaces for examining connections and linkages, and illuminate other spaces to be explored.

MacNaughton (2003) also uses rhizoanalysis to map and connect diverse fragments of data. Following Grosz (1994), Alvermann (2000) and Davies (2000), she asks the following questions to aid her rhizoanalysis: What are some of the diverse fragments in
this data? What are the connections between fragments? How do these fragments connect to fragments of texts outside of it? How do the fragments connect to me? And, what do these fragments do to each other?

If, as MacNaughton (2003, p.37) says, rhizoanalysis is about looking for “unlikely connections” and “raising questions that generate further reflection and exploration of a text, such as research data”, then over-theorising this story about Marcy becomes unlikely. More important is the ongoing question: “How will I honour those children whose voices struggle to be heard?” (p.41). Marcy’s voice was ‘audible’ through her actions and the unequal power relationship momentarily equalised as she resisted complying. By planting herself on my lap, she posited her desire for learning and enacted her empowerment. Perhaps also in this moment she was enacting her understanding of curriculum. Perhaps she was (re)conceptualising curriculum by attempting to negotiate her own puzzling, on her own terms, within her own nomadic space.

Curriculum as Rhizome

Honan (2004) undertakes rhizoanalysis to explore policy texts used by teachers. Her concern is with socially just education – this resonates with my concern for Marcy – and, for Honan, rhizomatics inform different ways of thinking about relationships between texts and readers. She uses Deleuze’s project as “an apparatus of social critique” and, like the researchers above, responds to its “insistent question [of] how does it work?” (p.268). Her rhizoanalysis works with Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ceaseless interconnecting among various assemblages of meaning. Similarly, if I am intent on furthering discussion of Te Whaariki, then a rhizoanalysis might involve mapping its “multiplicity of linkages” (Honan, 2004, p.269). It might for example, involve multiplicities of linking and interconnecting among Te Whaariki and other New Zealand policy documents for early childhood education and evaluation and research of policy, as well as: (a) the readings of policy texts and works of Deleuze & Guattari and other rhizoanalyses, (b) other methodological approaches that work with processes of inquiry, (c) research that seeks children’s stories and their readers and teachers and educational researchers and Marcy’s story and...and...and..., suggesting a plurality of connections. As Honan (2004) puts it, there is no one correct pathway within rhizoanalysis, there is “an infinite array of mappings possible...a ceaseless flow of connections” (pp.269-70). Through, across and within their teaching practice early childhood teachers can also create assemblages of practices for use in their own particular settings, as they negotiate their own nomadic spaces and find their own entryways into their own analyses.

Where To From Here?

As with Marcy’s story, there is a plurality of possibilities when reading Te Whaariki rhizomatically. For example, Te Whaariki, as a metaphorical ‘woven mat’, depicts the orderly weaving of principles and strands into an objective construct, but it is possible to extend our reading of this complicated order (as in tracing) to include complex rhizomatic concepts (as in mapping). What if we (re)conceptualise early childhood
curriculum as complex matting, as chaotically acentred, as a mass of middles, as processual lines of flight? This may open up possibilities for discovering interwoven systems that map (unanticipated) connections and enable a rhizomatic exploration of new directions, new worlds of information, new ways of conceiving early childhood, and new spaces of intellectual engagement. Thinking of Te Whāriki as rhizomatous matting becomes a way for teachers and researchers to appear in different curricular spaces, spaces not constrained by conventional linear ways of thinking and operating. In such spaces we may choose, for example, to focus on documenting the processuality of learning, rather than specific outcomes. That is, not to end the documentation when specified learning outcomes are achieved, but to continue to work with processes that ask: What else exists in these spaces of learning? In working with stories as they unfold, shared understandings about complex understandings of curriculum, in both children’s and teachers’ stories, become visible.

As well, (re)conceptualising curriculum as matting may mean that Marcy would not have to comply with adult expectations and understandings of Te Whāriki’s strands. Her learning would not be subject to an adult moulding of prescribed learning outcomes. Her attempt to communicate what was important for her learning would not be viewed as disruptive behaviour; rather it would become a nomadic deviation in flow appropriate to her wellbeing and learning in that moment. Marcy appeared to signal a desire for her learning to flow rhizomatically through nomadic spaces when she attempted to explore other spaces. But her understanding of curriculum went unrecognised, her story was unrepresented, her knowing about her interests was overruled, her vision for her future remained unseen. Such situations and questions disturb conventional conceptions of children’s understandings, opening conversations for theoretical change. In responding differently to Marcy’s (disruptive) behaviour, what other opportunities for Marcy and her learning might have emerged if her desire to stay with the puzzles had been accommodated? What if she had been allowed to pause amidst the linear routines and complexly amass her learning? What else might Marcy have found in her nomadic space?

Deleuze and Guattari resonantly illuminate spaces for exploring that are both conceptually autonomous and intertextually complex; spaces that are attracting the attention of curricular scholars and teachers alike as they perform nomadic inquiry and rhizoanalysis; spaces in which we may: (re)consider how we think, (re)consider (the) ways we think about thinking, and (re)conceptualise what children's understandings of curriculum might be; spaces that embody early experiences in learning as both children and adults journey together in their understandings. How we want to respond to Marcy’s story will help us decide whether thinking about curriculum as processes of rhizomatous inquiry is a desirable (ad)venture.

References


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